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Photography into language: *"Shorelines"* by Derek Mahon

Maryvonne Boisseau ♦

The significant presence of visual arts in Derek Mahon's poetry has been constant from the early poems – one thinks, among many others, of his memorable canonical poems "Courtyards in Delft" (1981) and "The Hunt by Night" (1982) – to his recent production, and this presence has inevitably aroused much critical interest.[1] Brown (1994: 39) notes his attention "to the act of seeing" and describes him as a "markedly visual poet" (*id.*: 38). To a certain extent this places him within a long tradition of *ekphrasis* illustrated by such poets as Keats, Auden or Williams, to name but a few, but also, and more significantly, according to Edna Longley (1994), this links him to Yeats, Pre-Raphaelitism and Symbolism, like many other contemporary Irish poets. Yet, if the term *ekphrasis* may seem appropriate and convenient to refer to his poems that more or less explicitly deal with paintings, painters and forgers, Mahon's *ekphraseis* might not fit so easily into a restricted sense of the term and extend beyond the mere description of paintings to include evocations of at least one documentary film[2] and artistic photographs by different photographers.

However, the aim of this article is not to explore the literary implications of the issue of *ekphrasis* in Mahon's poetry within the context of Ireland, nor is it to examine how pictures interact with narratives, or descriptions, but rather to try and understand how the text itself, in its structure, rhythm, discursive continuities and discontinuities accounts for the traces of the presence of a photograph, or series of photographs, as is the case in the poem under scrutiny, "Shorelines".[3] In other words, I propose to address the issue of their linguistic modes of presence in the text, ultimately questioning the very existence of the photographs themselves as objects, once language has got hold of them.

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1 See among others Brown (1994), York (2002), Boisseau and Bonafous-Murat (2003), Haughton (2007), Longley (1995).

2 See "Epitaph for Robert Flaherty", *Night-Crossing* (1968) Oxford, Oxford University Press (rep. 1969), p. 29.

3 "Shorelines" in *Harbour Lights* (2005), The Gallery Press, Loughcrew, Oldcastle, County Meath (© Derek Mahon). The poem is reproduced at the end of the article.

In the first section, I will briefly examine some aspects of the problematics concerning the links that have existed between photography and poetry since the early days of photography, to turn, in the second and third sections, to the reading and linguistic analysis of the poem "Shorelines", paying particular attention to stanzaic composition as well as to rhythm and its implications in terms of interpretation.

1. Photography and poetry

1.1 Convergence, divergence

In an essay on poetry and modernity[4] the poet and critic Octavio Paz (1992: 68) described poetry as "un art de la convergence" and as pure presence in so far as it seeks the intersecting point of past, present and future. Thus poetry is permanence. The same could be said of photography as it fixes people, places or landscapes at a certain time and forever, framing space and checking the passing of time.[5] Another possible line of convergence is the way poetry and photography refer to the "real". In both arts, the referent is doubly constructed by the author of the photography and by the viewer, by the poet-enunciator and the reader-enunciator. The photographer is involved in various ways in the whole process of selecting and framing a scene, shooting and developing the negatives while the viewer does not necessarily sees what the photographer saw, or intended to show, at the moment of shooting the picture. Interpretation is at work in the perception and reading of a photograph. In the same way, the author of a poem, or enunciator, is also involved in the construction of the utterance or poem as utterance and the reader in a similar process of constructing the meaning of the utterance. This is not a simple two-way process but a more complex interplay between mediate access to the referent of the subject in the picture and the extra-linguistic referent of the linguistic representation. In both photography and writing this double construction allows variations and differences in the perception of the referent induced by the different subjective points of view and distant vantage points (such as time gaps for instance).

Nonetheless, this parallel should not mask the fact that they obviously represent two distinct semiotic systems. It should also be mentioned that in spite of the similarities, one specific difference concerning the process of creation remains. Indeed, photography requires a certain amount of technology while the art of writing requires imagination, as is commonly acknowledged. Moreover poetry is an ancient art while photography belongs to our modern times and if, at the very beginning

4 "Rupture et Convergence", in *L'Autre voix. Poésie et fin de siècle*. See bibliography for full reference. The text was first read at Collège de France in 1989.

5 The likely destruction in time of transparencies and prints does not contradict this. Formally and absolutely speaking the scene is fixed forever. New technology (such as digitization) will even prolong the life of pictures under a new form.

of its development, such poets as Nerval or Hugo were immediately enthusiastic, seeing it as a new artistically promising medium, others like Baudelaire and much later Michaux were very doubtful of this new technique which "consacrait un goût vulgaire au détriment de l'imagination" (Collomb, 2009: 2). Michaux was particularly hostile to it because it only showed the surface of things while literature revealed the inner side:

> […] Mes livres montrent ma vie intérieure. Je suis, depuis que j'existe, contre l'aspect extérieur, contre ces photos appelées justement pellicules, qui prennent la pellicule de tout, qui prennent tant qu'elle peuvent les maisons familiales ou autres, les murs, les meubles, tout ce qui est permanent et stabilité et que je n'accepte pas, au travers de quoi je me vois passant.[6]

Nevertheless it would be difficult to deny the significance of photography today and its interaction with other arts: "[…] Elle envahit les arts plastiques, irrigue toute la création artistique et établit des ponts entre des secteurs d'activité très divers. Pour nombre d'écrivains, elle est devenue un outil de travail, une source d'inspiration, le révélateur privilégié de la sensibilité contemporaine." (*id.*: 2)

1.2 Derek Mahon and photography

There are few poems inspired by photographs in Mahon's early work in spite of the photographic quality of his writing as can be seen in this couplet entitled "Negatives": "Gulls in a rain-dark cornfield / crows on a sunlit sea"[7], and these poems read like affectionate evocations of happy moments.[8] It is in his more recent output, particularly in his collection *Harbour Lights*, that poems seem to be occasioned by photographic reminiscences or more directly by series of photographs that trigger meditations on the rapport between poetry and what he calls "the real". His own approach to the art of photography has been influenced by his reading of Susan Sontag's essay, *On Photography* (1977) and Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (1980), as well as by his affinity for John Minihan's work.[9] In Mahon's view, a photograph,

6 Qtd by Collomb (2009: 15, footnote 4): *Lettre à Henri Bréchon*, juillet 1958, citée par J.-P. Martin, *Henri Michaux*, Biographies / N.R.F., Paris : Gallimard (2003), p. 541.
7 "Light Music", in *Collected Poems* (1999), p. 70.
8 See "The Old Snaps", in *Collected Poems* (1999), p. 112, from which I quote the last three lines: "But the old snaps are always there, / Framed for ever in your heart and mine / Where no malicious hands can twist or tear."
9 John Minihan is considered as a prominent photographer in Ireland and is particularly famous for his portraits of Beckett.

or a painting, "is part of, an extension of the subject", a "*tableau vivant*".[10] Like Minihan, he belongs to "the old school, whose photographs are irrefutable proof that something happened." (Minihan, 1998: 12).

Poems can be about photography or directly inspired by photographs. This is the case of the poem "Shorelines" which is based on a series of photographs by a Cork artist, Vivienne Roche. Their subject is landscape, or rather seascape and "sand studies". This series is the immediate referent of the poem in so far as the poem refers to the photographs but as the language of the poem constructs the pictures as its direct referent, it produces an unstable image which is no longer that of the negatives but the representation forged and developed by language, thus effacing the photographs which no longer exist as objects. The subject of the photographs and the representation constructed by language are fused into one single representation, itself an interpretation mingling the represented landscape and the "real" landscape.

2. Constructing the referent: stanzaic composition

2.1 Ambivalence

Right from the start, the reading of the poem is framed by the mention that "this sequence is based on a series of photographs by the Cork artist Vivienne Roche". The reference to the poem through the use of the situational deictic *this* and to the construction of an occurrence of a series of photographs through an extraction operation determine a pragmatic relation between the linguistic situation and the "extralinguistic" reality, between a reader and the poet-enunciator and, at one remove, the artist. The seaside landscape that the photograph depicts is going to be unfolded by the reader (the mind's eye that reads the photographs and the reader's eyes that read the text) following the linear development of the poem. It is composed of a series of eleven six-line stanzas. The lines are short and the stanzas apparently even in spite of an irregular rhyme scheme within each stanza. At first sight, as a self-contained unit, each stanza may refer to one single picture, the series then counting eleven photographs. However, stanzas relate to one another and it is uncertain whether they do indeed each describe a different photograph.

The first two stanzas are closed syntactic units listing the elemental natural features that belong to the landscape at a general level in the first one (water and earth and air) as if a corresponding picture was a panoramic view of the seaside (even though the eye can also see some minute detail such as "every worm-hole"), and at a more specific level in the second stanza as if the subject of a second picture was specifically

10 Mahon borrows the first expression from Sontag whom he quotes in his foreword to *An Unweaving of Rainbows*, and the French expression from Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (p. 5. See bibliography for full reference).

that breakwater and the gull gliding over the ebbing tide. Nevertheless there is a sort of universal value in the description and the two stanzas taken together could also sum up the whole series, revealing a quintessential landscape without describing any specific picture. The absence of determiners, *Ø driftwood*, *Ø cloud castle*, *Ø expiring lines of froth*, *Ø absorbing sand*, *Ø earth*, *Ø air*, *Ø water*, *Ø breakwater* (1, 2[11]) together with the generic value of the pinpointing determiner *the*, ***the*** *frantic shingle-dash*, ***the*** *gull-glide*, ***the*** *wave-wash* (1, 2) mark the construction of qualitative occurrences that directly refer to the notions themselves or to phenomenal occurrences of something akin to an empirical complex notion. This indeterminacy prevents any straightforward identification of either stanza with a particular picture.

The next two stanzas start with the determiners *these* and *this*, a conspicuous marker pointing to some of the photographs and relating the complete predication to the situation of a viewer actually looking at the pictures. The situational effect of pinpointing is reinforced by the fact that the noun phrases, which are followed by a comma, *these sand studies* (3), *this one* (4), form one tone unit corresponding to the theme of the predication and linking the stanzas to the first two, which otherwise might have only registered unmediated impressions of a landscape. Besides, the prominence of the theme, that is the actual photographs, is made explicit through the repetition, at the end of the first line, of the determiner *these* which carries an accent and anticipates the explicit reference to the photographs, *vitreous transparencies* (3). Thus each stanza is a complete single sentence with a theme and a predicate, and an opening line and closure that convey a sense of integrity and purpose. The verbs in the simple present tense, *expose* (3) and *show* (4) explain the function of the photographs and reveal the intention that lies behind the composition, stating their status as works of arts that both refer to the real landscape and its imagined vivid recreation: "as graphic as any dream".

The next stanza, also a single syntactic unit, only connects with the preceding stanzas through *th* the anaphoric morpheme of the adverb *there* introducing the existential pattern. The adverb metaphorically operates a shift from the "situation" of the photographs as objects to the subject of the photographs so that the situation is no longer that of the photographs themselves but that of "the rising sea-level", the very motion of the tide. Moreover, reading backwards to the relative indeterminacy of the first element of the noun phrase, the reader perceives a gradual immersion of the viewer in the representation of the landscape: what he sees is not just the rising sea-level but *a special calm / in the rising sea-level* (5). This paves the way for the next three stanzas which focus on one aspect, *closer in* (6), that contrasts with the general movement of the sea: *a swirl of incoming tide / has signed a separate peace* (6).

11 The figures between brackets refer to the number of the stanza.

2.2 A musical composition

These three stanzas constitute one single syntactic unit as only one sentence unfolds over eighteen lines of verse, like a wave slowly unfurling until it breaks into foam. This movement has a soothing effect on "the riotous mind" (8) and more than a description, this is a meditation on the part that landscape plays in the poet's imagination, connecting him to the fundamental rhythms of the universe: what had so far been only the suggestion of sound becomes a crucial element of the landscape with its opposition between silence and roar. In this long period, semantics and syntax interact: the notional domain /tide/ is carefully detailed (from *rising sea-level*, *tide-race*, *a swirl of incoming tide*, *ripples*, *a thoughtful stave*, *slow-motion wave*) and from a syntactic point of view, the progression is underlined by markers whose function is to connect the various parts of the sentence so that the flow of discourse continues uninterrupted. These markers are strategically placed at the beginning of the stanza: *each one* (7) refers back to *ripples* in the last line of stanza 6, and *proposing* (*-ing* morpheme) connects stanza 8 to the occurrence of *a thoughtful stave* (7) which it qualifies. The new information focus, and end-focus, is in this last stanza with the confirmed shift to music and sound parallel to the construction of complex referential values through the choice of polysemic words such as *stave* (7). The construction of the linguistic representation is analogous to a musical composition (the metaphor is in the text: *silent strings*, *stave*, *note*, *music*, [6, 7]), adding another meta-level to the organization of the whole sequence: the landscape graphically represented on the photographs (*closer in* opening stanza 6), the linguistic representation of the landscape (syntactic and semantic interplay), the "real" natural landscape with "its random natural noise" (8) and the interpretation of the landscape: *proposing […] / a new kind of 'found' / spirit-breathing music / […] the basic / tones of an ancient sound*, paradoxically newer than modern "pop" (8).

The next three stanzas are separate syntactic units and each may, or may not, refer to an individual picture. However, they relate to the rest of the poem through the continuity of the theme of the landscape as if they were notes added to the underlying meditation that runs through the sequence. They point to details in a seemingly random fashion: the breakwater, the stanchions, the action of salt on the first rocks, wrack, the wren-wing and the wren, as the eye examines and gives movement to the landscape-in-the-picture. Each is all at once an impressionistic and exact description of something live, as if the photographs were not static but animated, re-setting the landscape into present and permanent time. Several markers, grammatical, syntactic and lexical, combine to operate the shift from space to atemporality, or rather to atemporal physical space, which does not necessarily rule out duration:

i. the present tense of action verbs: *the breakwater […] descends*; *the stanchions stride* (9); *wrack whips whistle and snore* (11);
ii. the absence of a verb in complex notional occurrences which precludes any reference to a precise time (*The long contingent action / of salt on the first*

rocks / a never ceasing friction, / no respite and no pity (10); *rough face of the waters* (11);

iii. the foregrounding of an adjective, an adverbial, or noun phrase to delay the occurrence of the predication itself: *Resistant, […] the breakwater descends*; *seaward the stanchions stride* (9); *But flick of a wren-wing / And she sits […]* (11);

iv. the choice of lexical items that denote duration: *The long contingent action / […] / a never ceasing friction* (10); *no respite and no pity*[12] (10) together with the *-ing* morpheme *losing* (9); *quick-shelving* (9); *never ceasing* (10).

The notion of atemporal physical space is filtered through the language of the poem. The result is the slow construction of a symbolic interpretation of pictures representing of an elemental landscape endowed with timeless features which contrast with the punctual value of events such as *flick of a wren-wing*. This generic interpretation is counterbalanced by its anchorage in the enunciator's present time and experience: "this is the raw reality, / always that harsh index" (10), fusing image and reality.

3. Effacing the photographs: continuities and discontinuities

3.1 Simultaneity and linearity

The reader may intuitively perceive the dynamics of each stanza and the logical relations among them but the various implications of the composition are understood *a posteriori*. Moreover, the spatial simultaneity that characterizes photographic representation is only accessible through the linearity and continuity of discourse.[13] As has just been shown, the notion of atemporal physical space is filtered through the language of the poem by operations resulting in the construction of meaning. It is also clear that in the case of a poem, linearity is counterpoised by the visual layout of the poem on the page and its influence on its reading. Leaving aside a metric reading of the poem, it then seems that various distinct and complementary syntactic, prosodic and enunciative elements converge to confirm the logic of the stanzaic composition and disclose the significance of the sequence. Those elements

12 *Respite* and *pity* do not specifically denote duration but they occur as qualitative notions whose actualization is permanently invalidated by their negative determination.

13 "Le cadre de l'image photographique se remplit instantanément et complètement, ce qui ne veut rien dire en littérature où tout se joue selon une notion d'au fur et à mesure, de poursuite et non de remplissage, de tracé et non de complétude, de déroulement et non de densité." (D. Roche, *Entretien avec Charles Grivel*, reproduit dans *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, "*Photolittérature*", n°210, 1988-2, p. 64-65, qtd in Collomb 2009: 4).

are parataxis versus hypotaxis, compounds, rhymes and the density of alliterations set against some dominant vocalic sounds.

3.2 Parataxis, hypotaxis, compounds and rhymes

In keeping with the permanent and universal values attached to the type of landscape described, the poem gives a prominent place to notions expressed by nouns and, strikingly, by compound nouns, the poet drawing on the highly productive syntactic N-N composition of the English language. Their density is high throughout the poem but they are given particular prominence in the stanzas that simply record the elements of the landscape without necessarily setting them in fully articulated sentences. The discontinuity effect generated by the absence of main verb in these stanzas where they appear is modulated by the integration of subordinate clauses or complements that add new information or circumstantial comment on the whole occurrence: *absorbing sand* ***where every / worm-hole is a discovery*** (1), *and vigilant gull-glide, / cold eyes* ***on whatever blind / nourishment the wave-wash*** */ receding,* ***leaves behind*** (2), *the surface a hushed veil /* ***where you expect a fin*** (5).

Some of these compound nouns are lexicalized: *driftwood* and *breakwater* (1), others are semi-lexicalized: *worm-hole* (1), *sea-level* (5) and *bath-house* (7). Most of them are invented and immediately trigger a mental image of the complex notion they express: *cloud castle*, *shingle-dash*, *gull-glide*, *wave-wash* (2), *sun-splinters* (3), *tide-race* (6), *air garden*, *wind bower* (7), *soul breeze* (8), *near-silence* (Adv+N), *wren-wing* (11). To these nouns can be added two compound adjectives: *spirit-breathing music* (8) and *quick-shelving sands* (9). Most of them appear at the end of a line and rhyme with another word. With the exception of *near-silence*, all bear a main stress on the first syllable, as can be expected, but most of them also bear a strong secondary accent on the second monosyllabic word or first syllable of the second word, contrary to the alternation of strong and weak syllables. This accent strengthens the rhythmic impact of the auditory rhymes: *ebbing* ***tide*** */ gull-****glide*** (2), ***fin*** */ dol****phin*** (5), *whisper****ings*** */ str****ings*** (6), *wren-****wing*** */ ****sing*** (11), eye rhymes: *shingle* ***dash*** */ wave-****wash*** (2), and slant rhymes: *sea-le****vel*** */* ***veil*** (5), *tide-****race*** */* ***peace*** (6).

However, there does not seem to be a very regular rhyming pattern and some rhymes cling too obviously together as *cream / dream* (3) while others are visual evocations of a rhyme or near-rhymes, *froth / both* (1), *dash / wash* (2), *rocks / index* (10). Those rhymes are generally not contiguous. Yet, they equally activate the reader's auditory memory as they often echo back to other similar sounds in the same line or in the same stanza creating a kind of reverberating effect and drawing attention to inner rhymes, *vig****ilant*** */ nourish****ment*** (2), *clu****ster****ing / splin****ters*** and ***silvery*** */* ***cinders*** (4), *ris****ing*** */ spinn****ing*** (5), this slightly nasal [iŋ] sound being shortened and lightened at the end of the last two lines of stanza 5 with the non velar [in] echo of *fin and dolphin* (5). The unstressed [iŋ] sound that marks the last syllable of the

present participles and verbal adjectives runs throughout the poem occurring at least once, and more often twice, in eight stanzas out of eleven, *expiring, absorbing* (1), *ebbing*, *receding* (2), *clustering*, *rippling* (4), *rising*, *spinning* (5), *slipping*, *incoming* (6), *proposing*, *breathing* (8), *losing*, *shelving* (9) *ceasing* (10), revealing the presence of a so far unobtrusive observer[14] and forming a subjective semantic network of action and motion. The landscape is both fixed (it has been fixed by the photographer) and live (through language), a paradox summed up in the two concluding lines of the poem (11) ending with a concentration of the alliterations in the word *flick* and the [iŋ] rhyme, a forceful and assertive echo of the numerous occurrences of the sound: *Bu**t flick** of a wren-**wing** / and she **sits** on a ro**ck** to **sing*** (movement, fixity, action).

In a similar fashion the [aid/t/aind] rhymes direct our attention from the outer edge of the stanza to the vocalic diphthong [ai], one of the predominant vocalic sounds in the poem. The first one ***tide*/*glide*** is softened by the neighbouring nasalized rhyme ***blind*/*behind*** (2) and seems to open and continue the [i] and [i:] of *shingle*, *vigilant, receding*, and *leaves* (2). The same happens in the third and fourth occurrences of that same rhyme: ***aside*/*tide*** interacts with *slipping*, *incoming*, *ripples* and echoes *signed*, *sighs*, and *silent* (6) while ***stride*/*tide*** (9) interacts with *quick* and *giggle* and duplicates the sound at the closure of the stanza, *high **ti**de*, too close to the common expression *high **time*** not to suggest the exhilaration of the moment: "[…] the roar and giggle of a punctual high tide" (9) while the four occurrences taken together also recall the temporal dimension of the cyclic return of the tide. Listening back to the fourth stanza and to the modulated diphthongal rhyme *night*/*flight* one hears in anticipation the *flight* of the *light* in the last line of the stanza: "the li**gh**t **l**eft long ago" and may easily shift to *expiring lines* (1) and to the title *Shorelines*.

3.3 Alliterative patterns

This phenomenon of "semanticisation" of the rhyme cannot be isolated from the overall alliterative scheme as the /l/ alliteration shows in the line just quoted. The distribution of the plosives /k/ and /g/, fricative /s/, and approximants /r/ and /w/ forms another integrated network of alliterative combinations instrumental in constructing the rhythm of the poem, hence its significance. They mainly go in pairs: ***s**un-**s**plinters* (4), ***s**ilent **s**trings* (6), ***r**aw **r**eality* (10). The alliteration may sum up the dissemination of the sounds in previous lines as in ***gl**ull-**gl**ide* that repeats *shin**gl**e* and *vi**gil**ant* (2) or the concentration of one particular consonant can be interpreted as a deliberate lead to interpretation. The massive presence of the /r/ consonant in the third stanza, *vitreous transpa**r**encies*/*bare featu**r**e*/*o**r**iginal **r**ock sculptu**r**e*/***r**ubble and **r**opes of cream*/*as **graphic** as any dream* (3) leads to the resounding and somehow emphatic adjective which combines an initial semi plosive and /r/ sound, and a

14 Another discreet trace of the observer is the generic pronoun *you* in stanza 5 though a more assertive presence is audible in stanza 8 ("please", l. 5).

final stop. Although this seems purely subjective, the word itself appears as a vivid representation of its twofold meaning referring to the photographs as art and to the details of the pictures and "**r**aw **r**eality". But the most conspicuous consonant is probably the /w/ consonant. Its density is very high throughout the poem. It occurs massively in the first two stanzas leading first to the word *water*, highlighted by its initial position at the beginning of the last line of the first stanza. Then it leads to the compound *breakwater* in the same initial position in the next line of the following stanza and finally to the compound *wave-wash* at the end of the fifth line (3). The whole poem is also about *water*, the better world of two: "two worlds, earth and air; / **water**, the best of both"[15] (1). The /w/ alliteration continues to the end of the poem where it culminates in a quasi-onomatopoeic combination of sounds, ***W**rack **wh**ips **wh**istle and **s**nore, / then near-**s**ilen**ce** on**ce** more / as the tide recon**s**iders; / Rough face of the **waters**.* The gradual shift from [w] to [s] is a musical decrescendo from *water* to *waters* in what sounds like a very yeatsian rhyme with a blurred final /r/: *recon**s**i**d**ers* / *wa**t**ers* so that space can be filled with a pure birdsong.[16]

Two main rhythmic threads, one visual, the other auditory, stand out as the poem is read forward and backward. Their interaction and combination give prominence to key notions (/water/, /tide/, /reality/ and the notional property /graphic/) that determine interpretation enabling the reader to make sense of the logically organized sequence beyond the rhetoric of the *ekphrasis*. These notions correspond to elemental cognitive concepts that form the basis of anybody's deep experience and knowledge of the universe and of its laws. And indeed what the reader mentally sees, or imagines, or considers, is not the landscape represented on the photographs but the image created from the linguistic representation of that landscape.[17] The photographs have been effaced. And this re-creation too is "as graphic as any dream" and as real as "the raw reality": the artistic vision of the landscape yields to that "harsh index" foregrounded by, and through, language.

15 This line of verse sounds like an echo of Rachel Carson, a pioneering American scientist whose work shaped Mahon's awareness of environmental issues. In *Under the Sea-Wind* (Penguin [1996] 2007), she wrote: "[…] of all natural resources, water has become the most precious" (p. 119). This touches on the intertextual references including his own poetry that also contribute to the meaning of the poem but this is beyond the scope and aim of the present paper.

16 Or a pure voice? ("and **sh**e sits on a rock to sing").

17 As we conclude this study, browsing through Mahon's *New Collected Poems* just received (May 2011), we realize that the poem is republished under a new title, "Sand Studies", that two stanzas from another poem ("On the Beach" in *Harbour Lights*, 2005) have been inserted just before the last stanza and that the reference to Roche's series of photographs has disappeared. This obviously distances the poem from Roche's series of photographs and seems to confirm what we have tried to show: the irreducible distance between language and image.

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Shorelines

This sequence is based on a series of photographs by the Cork artist Vivienne Roche.

Driftwood and cloud castle,
expiring lines of froth,
absorbing sand where every
worm-hole is a discovery:
two worlds, earth and air;
water, the best of both.

Breakwater, an ebbing tide,
the frantic shingle-dash
and vigilant gull-glide,
cold eyes on whatever blind
nourishment the wave-wash,
receding, leaves behind.

These sand studies, these
vitreous transparencies
expose each bare feature:
original rock sculpture,
rubble and ropes of cream
as graphic as any dream.

This one, taken at night
or nearly, shows a flight
of clustering sun-splinters,
a rippling, archipelago
of silvery star cinders
the light left long ago.

There is a special calm
in the rising sea-level;
quietude, cool but warm,
the surface a hushed veil
where you expect a fin
or a spinning dolphin.

Closer in, slipping aside
from the furious tide-race,
a swirl of incoming tide
has signed a separate peace
with sighs and whisperings,
its ripples silent strings,

each one a thoughtful stave
next to the bath-house roar,
air garden and wind bower
where each slow-motion wave
is a blue note designed
to calm the riotous mind —

proposing, like a soul breeze
or random natural noise,
a new kind of 'found'
spirit-breathing music:
not pop, please, but the basic
tones of an ancient sound.

Resistant, a losing struggle,
the breakwater descends
from quick-shelving sands;
seaward the stanchions stride
into the roar and giggle
of a punctual high tide.

The long contingent action
of salt on the first rocks
a never ceasing friction,
no respite and no pity:
this is the raw reality,
always that harsh index.

Wrack whips whistle and snore,
then near-silence once more
as the tide reconsiders;
rough face of the waters.
But flick of a wren-wing
and she sits on a rock to sing.

Derek Mahon, "Shorelines", *Harbour Lights*, Gallery Books, 2005, p. 48-50.
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